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Nicaragua: A Dubious Innocence

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ACCORDING to Secretary of State George Shultz, the C-123 transport shot down in Nicaragua "was, (from) all we know, a plane hired by private people, apparently some of them American. They had no connection with the U.S. government at all."

Other sources in the government said the "private

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group" sponsoring the plane was led by retired U.S. Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub. A CIA spokeswoman has said flatly that "CIA is not involved."

The government's credibility problem is with those who have memories. Officials in the past have given almost identical denials on similar operations, now known to have been the CIA's. And General Singlaub, who denies any knowledge of the plane, has a long history of U.S. government covert work.

A veteran of World War II Office of Strategic Services intelligence operations in China, General Singlaub later joined the CIA and was its deputy station chief in South Korea during the Korean War. His Army career ended in 1978 when he was chief of staff of the American forces in South Korea. In the spirit of his predecessor, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, he challenged the policies of President Carter and was forced to retire.

Almost immediately the cause of General Singlaub was taken up by Ronald Reagan in syndicated radio broadcasts. General Singlaub in turn joined groups supporting Mr. Reagan's presidential candidacy. In 1979 and 1980 he told Guatemala's president, Gen. Lucas Garcia, that Mr. Reagan, once elected, would aid the anti-communist struggle in Central America.

On November 22, 1981, General Singlaub inaugurated his "private group," the U.S. Council for World Freedom. This was four days after the new Reagan administration, in its secret "Document 17," first authorized covert military action in support of the Nicaraguan "contras." From this base, General Singlaub became chairman of the World Anti-Communist League. It has frequently been claimed, but never proved, that WACL was set up with CIA assistance in the 1950s, aid channeled through two of the general's old OSS colleagues: Ray Cline and E. Howard Hunt.

What cannot be denied is that since 1984, when General Singlaub, through WACL, continued to support the "contras" after Congress halted CIA aid, he has acted under direct guidance of the White House and National Security Council staffs. Both NSC officials and General Singlaub himself have identified Lt. Col. Oliver North, a member of the NSC staff, as their contact point for the private effort.

The evidence from the plane recently shot down suggests the aid is not as "private" as Secretary Shultz has claimed. The dead pilot, Capt. William H. Cooper, has been identified as a pilot with Southern Air Transport, a former CIA "proprietary" airline. Intelligence officials have told Congress privately that both the pilot and copilot worked for the CIA "years ago."

It is true that in 1973 the CIA publicly sold Southern Air Transport to its former president, Stanley Williams, who had run it 11 years. But in 1976 the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, investigating the CIA, concluded that "most of the entities of which the agency has divested itself were either sold or given to willing individuals. In several cases, transfer of the entity was conditioned as an agreement that the proprietary [a private firm operated as a front] would continue to provide goods or services to the CIA."

Unnamed experts told the Associated Press Southern Air Transport "has continued its ties to the government." There are other indications the CIA, concerned about its increasingly high profile, has recently preferred to technically "retire" its personnel on especially sensitive operations.

Eugene Hasenfus, the surviving member of the C-123 crew, has been identified as a former employee of Air America, from the Vietnam War era when Air America was still a "proprietary" owned and operated by the CIA. In those days Air America was often used for the unconventional warfare operations in Asia of which general Singlaub has been a leading exponent. It was also common for officials, pilots and planes of the CIA's two airlines to be hired and leased back and forth from each other.

In those days it was always a practice to describe downed CIA planes and personnel as "private." When a CIA pilot was shot down in Sumatra in 1958, after bombing a church and killing 28 worshipers, the U.S. ambassador in Indonesia called the pilot a "private American citizen involved as a paid soldier of fortune."

That denial, like the present ones, was both deceptive and technically defensible. In fact, the pilot was then an employee of Civil Air Transport, which became Air America. After the government secured his release, he went to work for Southern Air Transport.

The difference is that in 1958 when the U.S. government issued its denial, the CIA's relationship to these "proprietary" airlines was not, as it has since become, a matter of historic record. For Secretary Shultz's denial to become credible, it will be necessary to expunge and rewrite the history books.

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